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ABSTRACT

The introduction to this curriculum guide notes problems in working with students in early adolescence and discusses the "generation gap," the value of literature for students, and the importance of planning a literature program to meet students' needs. The guide then suggests ways of helping students study heroes and heroines in folk literature, discusses epic conventions that may be treated in class, suggests a sample unit on heroes and heroines, and explains ways of helping students study the epic poem "Beowulf." Additional discussions show how the special needs of gifted students may be met by providing units on decision making, the Prometheus theme in literature, and fantasy literature. The conclusion of the guide points to adjustments and academic problems frequently faced by gifted students and stresses the importance of creating educational programs designed to meet their special needs. (GW)

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Teaching Gifted Students Literature in Grades Seven Through Nine

Prepared under the direction of the

Gifted and Talented Education Management Team
California State Department of Education

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A list of other publications that are available from the Department may be obtained by writing to the address given above.

FOREWORD

A primary goal of California public schools is to provide equal opportunity for *all* pupils to become proficient in intellectual skills and knowledgeable in the basic subjects. In our efforts to achieve this goal, we must provide programs that are of sufficient scope and depth to permit each child to learn at his or her own rate and to the full level of his or her ability.

Gifted pupils, as a group, have unique educational needs, many of which we can meet only by providing for a high degree of flexibility in their educational programs. Several years ago the Department of Education directed and coordinated a federally funded project for the development of curriculum materials of the type needed for such programs. The 1973 edition of this curriculum guide was a product of those efforts. I am pleased that the Department now has the opportunity to help further the educational opportunities for the gifted by publishing this 1978 edition, *Teaching Gifted Students Literature in Grades Seven Through Nine.* I am confident that this updated publication will prove to be as valuable as its predecessor in our efforts to help gifted children realize their full potential.

Superintendent of Public Instruction

PREFACE

This curriculum guide, which was planned and completed originally in 1973 as part of a project under provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title V, was updated this year as part of a Public Law 93-380, Section 404, project, Development of Teaching Competencies–Gifted and Talented Education. The guide is intended for use by the teachers of students whose general mental ability places them in the top 2 percent of all boys and girls. It is also recommended for use by administrators, consultants, and other professional personnel involved in helping gifted children.

Teaching Gifted Students Literature in Grades Seven Through Nine is one of a series of curriculum guides for use by teachers of mentally gifted students. The 1973 edition of the guide was written by Barbara L. Covey, Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District. She prepared the guide under the direction of John C. Gowan, Professor of Education, and his assistant, Joyce Sonntag, Assistant Professor of Education, both of San Fernando Valley State College (now California State University, Northridge). The guide was updated by Myra J. Redick, Mt. Diablo Unified School District, under the direction of Paul D. Plowman, Consultant, Gifted and Talented Education Management Team, California State Department of Education; and Director, Development of Teaching Competencies–Gifted and Talented Education project.

DAVIS W. CAMPBELL
Deputy Superintendent for Programs

J. WILLIAM MAY
Assistant Superintendent, and Director, Office of Curriculum Services

REX C. FORTUNE
Associate Superintendent for Secondary Education Programs

SIEG F. EFKEN
Program Manager of the Gifted and Talented Education Management Team

Publications Available from the California State Department of Education

The following publication, which is referenced in this curriculum guide, is available from the California State Department of Education, at a price of 65 cents per copy, plus sales tax for California residents:

English Language Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve (1976)

The following publications in the gifted education series are available from the Department, each at a price of 65 cents per copy, plus sales tax for California residents:

Curriculum Guide for Teaching Gifted Children Literature in Grades One Through Three (1977)*

Teaching Gifted Children Literature in Grades Four Through Six (1978)**

Teaching Gifted Students Literature in Grades Seven Through Nine (1978)***

Curriculum Guide for Teaching Gifted Children Science in Grades One Through Three (1977)*

Curriculum Guide for Teaching Gifted Children Science in Grades Four Through Six (1977)*

Curriculum Guide for Teaching Gifted Children Social Sciences in Grades One Through Three (1977)*

Curriculum Guide for Teaching Gifted Children Social Sciences in Grades Four Through Six (1977)*

Special Programs for Gifted Pupils (1962)

Teaching Gifted Children Art in Grades Four Through Six (1973)

Teaching Gifted Students Art in Grades Seven Through Nine (1973)

Teaching Gifted Students Art in Grades Ten Through Twelve (1973)

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CONTENTS

	Page
Foreword	iii
Preface	v
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Generation Gap	1
The Importance of Literature	1
The Importance of Planning	3
Chapter 2 The Hero and Heroine in Literature	5
Folk Literature	5
Epic Conventions	6
Sample Unit on Heroes and Heroines	8
Useful Suggestions	10
Beowulf	10
Chapter 3 Decision Making	13
Chapter 4 The Prometheus Theme in Literature	17
Legend of Prometheus	19
Material for Study	19
Chapter 5 Fantasy World	21
Chapter 6 Conclusion	23
Placement Errors	23
Implications for the Gifted	25
Selected References	27

Chapter 1

Introduction

For many students the years of early adolescence are pivotal in the development of attitudes and beliefs. These students are beginning to break away from the easy answers of childhood when parents or teachers provided ultimate authority in questions of right and wrong and good and bad. They want to learn what it will be like when they become adults. The changes in their bodies are outward evidence of similar changes happening within. Parents report that their twelve-, thirteen-, and fourteen-year-old children seem to be "different people" from the compliant individuals they were as younger children.

Generation Gap

For many families the generation gap begins when the child becomes eleven. It continues until he or she reaches adulthood. For some the gap is never bridged. Unfortunately, during the very time when young people most need adult understanding and guidance, few opportunities exist for boys and girls to meet with friendly, accepting adults. When the children begin to assert their roles as individuals and turn away from home and family to increase their maturation, they often have no adult to turn to other than those whom they have learned about from the communications media. For many young adolescents the only adult voice they hear regularly is that of the friendly disc jockey heard on their pocket transistor radios. They turn to him or her for answers to their questions.

Even in school increasingly fewer opportunities exist for students to chat with a teacher whom they respect. In the self-contained elementary school classroom, the teacher can react, for example, to a child's concern about what to do when he or she is teased by other children. But in the intermediate school or junior high school, emphasis on academic performance effectively blocks such one-to-one communication. School counselors, who must usually spend their time scheduling classes, seldom have time to listen to children.

The Importance of Literature

English, language arts, literature, and humanities classes can and should be places where young people discover that they are not alone

with their problems. The study of good selections of prose and poetry can provide such an opportunity. Classroom discussions about characters in books can be relatively impersonal. Students can concentrate on a particular problem as well as on the personal characteristics of the individual having the problem. For example, the adolescent tempted to try drugs can empathize with Faust without revealing his or her concerns to a threatening authority figure. All important literature is an examination of the human condition as seen through the eyes of the author and communicated by the words and actions of his or her characters.

Literary Themes

Students can read in books about difficult choices made by other young people. In the safety of their own homes they can, vicariously, be somebody else. They learn to predict consequences and to make value judgments. They can identify with a hero or suffer with the victims of their own wrong decisions. A great number of themes can be developed and explored with gifted students in grades seven through nine. Teachers should develop themes that are related to the needs of their students. Those outlined in this guide can serve as a starting point, but they are not sufficient for three years of instruction. The study of various themes can increase the gifted student's awareness of his or her own needs and feelings and his or her appreciation of the needs and feelings of others.

It is recognized that in some schools and school districts, teachers may have only a very limited or conservative selection of reading materials from which to choose. In some cases the nature of the community dictates the reading list. Often, a limited budget must be considered. On the other hand, some teachers are free to select and/or purchase a wide variety of materials. No matter which situation a teacher may be in, the important thing is that themes be explored fully and imaginatively and that all available materials be used. All of the units described in this guide can be undertaken with the use of state-adopted materials, such as *Projection in Literature, Counterpoint in Literature,* and Ginn and Company's *Reading 360* program. These materials include the works of such authors as William Saroyan, Vladimir Nabokov, John Steinbeck, and Ray Bradbury. Teachers should bear in mind that lively discussions, debates, projects, and simulation games are neither limited nor enhanced by available funding or materials.

It is suggested that the units described in this publication be presented in the same order in which they are presented herein: "The Hero and Heroine in Literature," "Decision Making," "The Prometheus Theme in Literature," and "Fantasy World."

Class Discussions

Teachers sensitive to the fears of young persons can build units of study around such questions as "Could I be heroic?" or "How can I learn to decide between good actions or bad?" or "Is there such a thing as 'situational ethics'?" As the class shares information gained from individual research on various examples of the theme, students themselves will often bring up their own actions and concerns. The presence of an adult who listens and responds is important during such discussions. He or she can aid in bridging the generation gap.

Gifted boys and girls are not immune from growing pains because of their intellectual skills. They have the same problems and concerns of other young adolescents and need time for working out their ideas with an adult with whom they can communicate objectively, after whom they can model themselves, or by whom they feel accepted and respected. For the highly gifted youngster, reading may provide the only contact with the minds of individuals as gifted as himself or herself.

Young persons take many ideas from great literature. One thirteen-year-old student pointed out that one can't get upset over the perils of Evangeline because the poem is written in three-quarter time. A fourteen-year-old student questioned whether Prometheus could be a devil-figure since Lucifer means "light bearer" and Prometheus stole the sacred fire.

The Importance of Planning

Teachers of gifted students in literature classes in grades seven through nine can be sure of only *one* common denominator: the students in their classes have met the requirements for being classified as *mentally gifted.* Some students will be extremely gifted. Some will present special challenges because of their antisocial behavior. Others will be well balanced and highly motivated. Some will have little or no sense of literary or historical background.

The teacher must evaluate the needs of the class and the needs of the individual students in it and must plan his or her program on the basis of those needs.

The introduction of great works of literature must be done with much care and thought, or students will be "turned off." The literary background of many students when they enter grade seven includes only samplings from their elementary school readers. Their supplementary reading may have included *Charlotte's Web* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.* Such students are not ready for *Paradise Lost,* but their literary interests can be advanced by recognizing their interests and "building" on them. For example, in a developmental

reading class in which a teacher change was made at the end of the first semester, the first teacher had been reading S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* to the class each day. The new teacher continued this activity because the students were so interested in the story. She did not consider *The Outsiders* to be a "Great Book," but she respected the values and interests of the group. When she finished, the teacher moved on to another work. She progressed slowly and recognized that the needs of the group were different from those of other groups with which she had worked. Shortly after she began reading *Animal Farm* to the class, John, who had one of the highest IQs in the school, a morbid home life, and a juvenile record for using and selling drugs, asked to take the book home. (He and several other gifted students had been placed in the class because of their lack of interest in academic subjects.) He wanted to read ahead on his own rather than wait for the teacher to continue the next day. John completed the book that night. The following day he told the teacher that she was to select what he would read next. He trusted her. Of course, not all students reacted in the same manner. Some members of the class did not progress beyond the youth-oriented novels in their personal reading.

Chapter 2

The Hero and Heroine in Literature

Some educators concerned with the causes of youthful unrest claim that young persons today have no heroes or heroines, or the wrong heroes or heroines, with whom to identify. An examination of fictional and nonfictional heroes and heroines of the past, as recorded in literature, will help to discover a basis for making comparisons of those of the past with those of the present.

Folk Literature

The heroes of folk literature are similar in many ways. Odysseus, Theseus, Siegfried, Roland, and El Cid emerge from the pages of history larger than life. They are bigger and braver and more altruistic than any boy or girl who has just become a teenager can hope to be. On the other hand, the contemporary exploits of Charlie's Angels and Starsky and Hutch are very popular with young teenagers. The reasons for this change in the concept of the hero and heroine are worth consideration.

Epic Hero

Like folk songs, folk literature or epic poetry was usually based on a semilegendary figure. Songs and stories about such figures were fashioned around the campfire and were passed on from person to person. Eventually, many of these songs and stories were compiled in a written piece of literature.

Changes in Attitude

The legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is a typical example of the changes that have occurred over the centuries in attitudes toward the hero. An eighth-century historian, Nennius, wrote of Arthur as a military chieftain, very similar to El Cid, who fought the invading Saxons some 200 years before Nennius' time. The figure of Arthur is only slightly less epic as recorded by Sir Thomas Malory in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in *The Idylls of the King* (1859). However, Arthur emerges as a real person in Terence H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958). A portion of this book, "The Sword in the Stone," was the basis for a Walt Disney film and a musical play written by Lerner and Loewe entitled *Camelot*, which portrayed a king with whom

observers could identify. White's Arthur, concerned about everyday problems, asks "What are the simple folk doing tonight?" in his efforts to live through a boring evening at home with Guinevere.

It is possible to trace this concern for an individual's daily problems to the growth of the communications media. As films and, later, television captured each intimate detail, authors also began to record such minutiae. Can a hero, for example, be heroic when one knows such details about him as whether he wears an undershirt?

Epic Conventions

It is enjoyable to find ways in which today's heroes and heroines possess the characteristics of epic heroes. Students of literature call these characteristics "epic conventions." These characteristics are the following:

1. *License to kill.* Heroes often have the power to decide who will live and who will die. They derive their power from God, or from the gods in the case of early heroes. Roland and El Cid are both encouraged by the Angel Gabriel. Today's heroes and heroines have the power of life and death because of "the law" or because of a delegated role connected with their jobs.

2. *Symbol of authority.* Roland has a sword named Durendal; Arthur, one named Excalibur. The swords of the epic heroes are visible evidence that the heroes have license to kill. Beowulf finds a sword, crudely fashioned long before by the giants, hanging on the wall of the cavern when he needs it to kill the ogress Grendel. Guns become symbolic swords for later heroes; Davy Crockett's "Ol' Betsy" is a typical example. This tradition of ultimate authority possessed by the hero is not limited to literature. Today's comic superheroes and superheroines can "zap" their enemies in a number of ways. Wonder Woman, whose popularity has been revived by television and comic books and whose special powers are gifts of the goddesses, has a headband that gives her strength, bracelets that protect her, and a lasso that can force her enemies to tell the truth.

3. *Special mode of transportation.* For many heroes the particular type of transportation they use is a remarkable horse. Bellerophon had Pegasus. Robert E. Lee had Traveler. The ships of Ulysses and Aeneas were quite extraordinary vehicles, and without them the heroes often suffered degradation and loss of power. The *Enterprise* conveys a shipload of space heroes on television's "Star Trek," and no disaster is quite as threatening as when a character is cut off from the mother ship. The writer H. G. Wells once found the mode of conveyance used in a book of his was important enough to name the book for it (*The Time Machine*).

4. *Reason for moving about* (usually altruistic and noble). Jason the Argonaut hunts for the Golden Fleece; Galahad seeks the Holy Grail; Arthur repels invaders; and Roland helps Charlemagne push the armies of Islam out of Europe for good. Each is on a quest, has a purpose to fulfill, or has a vow to keep. Before the literature of the Middle Ages, very few of the heroes accomplished such tasks for the love of a woman. Many of the women in the epics are relatively faceless unless they are fulfilling the heroic role; for example, Jaroslavna in the Russian legend of Igor.

The crew of the *Enterprise* is on a five-year mission to explore the farthest reaches of space, to go boldly where no human being has gone before.

5. *Quality of leadership.* The epic hero and his enemy tend to be larger than life. The epic heroes are leaders: the king of a country, the captain of a ship, or the leader of an army. Igor is a prince of Russia. Arthur is a king. Today's heroes and heroines tend to be loners or somebody other than the captain. Reader and viewer identification with heroes and heroines among the nonheroic may be a peculiarity of the twentieth century. Kafka wrote of nonheroes. Hemingway, on the other hand, may have been a throwback because he told stories of individuals who deal with the world in the style of epic heroes.

6. *Long white beard.* Students of literature delight in tracing the old gentleman with the long white beard. In the story of Roland, Charlemagne possesses this symbol of wisdom and age. El Cid grows a long white beard after he subdues the pagans, and Arthur grows his when he begins to draw knights together for the Round Table. The publication date of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) may explain why Merlin's beard is liberally besmeared with owl droppings even as he is guiding the education of young Arthur.

7. *Visibility.* The early heroes can be seen by friend and foe alike. Roland, who rides a white horse, seems almost to glitter in the sunlight as he rides to battle sheathed in armor, holding a lance with pure white pennants and long tassels streaming from it. Prince Igor leads his warriors in a golden line in the white light of day. The shields of El Cid's armies reflect the sun.

The Plantagenets, early kings of England who became almost legendary in their country's history, were big men, far taller than their soldiers. Furthermore, they had red hair. Marshall McLuhan claims that Hitler would have been laughed out of office long before achieving his goals if television had been invented during the 1930s and Hitler could have been seen by the Germans.

8. *Other epic conventions.* Many additional conventions can be watched for in myths and legends. Swans almost always herald death,

and fire is often associated with immortality. A sacred island or a sacred mountain exists to which the hero retires when he needs to regain his strength. The crossing of a river or immersion in water sometimes shows a change in the fortunes of the hero. El Cid lies sleeping alone near the Duero River when the Angel Gabriel appears to him and urges him to continue his efforts. The River Donets, after hailing and praising Prince Igor, allows him to pass during his escape. The idea of gold bringing death can be seen in *Beowulf,* the *Nibelungenlied,* and other folk legends.

Sample Unit on Heroes and Heroines

This sample unit on heroes and heroines is intended to provide suggestions for classroom activities to be directed by the teacher of average and gifted students.

A. Average students
   1. Knowledge (information-gathering) and memory storage
      a. Reading stories silently
      b. Reading selected portions of stories aloud (teacher or students)
      c. Viewing films, retelling stories
      d. Listening to taped portions of stories
      e. Having teacher-led discussions of themes and genre
      f. Listening to outside speakers
      g. Viewing slides and transparencies
      h. Listening to oral reports by class members to share in information gained
      i. Touching and viewing models, dioramas, and realia
      j. Studying the history of the times, distinguishing fact from fancy
   2. Comprehension (through cognition)
      a. Writing summaries of the plots
      b. Performing character analyses from information in the texts
      c. Preparing book reports
      d. Answering questions of fact
      e. Preparing timelines
      f. Charting story development
      g. Preparing slides and other visual aids
      h. Taping conversations
      i. Having small-group discussions
   3. Application (convergent-divergent production)
      a. Taking a teacher-made test
      b. Giving a play based on the story
      c. Preparing a series of visual aids, with background sound, for sharing with other classes and with parents
   4. Analysis (breaking down): Comparing two heroes or heroines as to spiritual or physical leadership
   5. Synthesis (divergent production): Writing an epic poem about a present-day hero or heroine

6. Evaluation (prediction): Comparing student products with others

B. Gifted students
   1. Knowledge (information-gathering) and memory storage: Reading, viewing, and listening
   2. Comprehension (through cognition)
      a. Student identification of themes, genre, metaphors, and similes
      b. Answering questions of fact
   3. Application (convergent-divergent production)
      a. Taking a teacher-made test
      b. Taking a student-made test
      c. Preparing culminating activities
   4. Analysis (evaluation, convergent production)
      a. Studying the history of the period portrayed
      b. Identifying whether the story first appeared during the period portrayed or during a later time
      c. Comparing two epics as to the spiritual or physical leadership of the hero
      d. Comparing similar epics from different countries
   5. Synthesis (divergent production)
      a. Writing an epic poem about a present-day hero or heroine
      b. Comparing a myth with historical evidence from the same period
      c. Identifying probable motivations of characters
      d. Identifying the original audience for a story and why the people needed a national hero
      e. Comparing epic conventions of a variety of heroic stories
      f. Comparing plot as told in the written story and as shown in films or on television
   6. Evaluation (prediction)
      a. Comparing student-made epics with original ones
      b. Discussing the roles of heroes or heroines in the development of a nation
      c. Asking who the present-day heroes are and whether they are derived from books or from the electronics media
      d. Examining (1) how the hero and heroine have changed as recorded in films; and (2) what is meant by an antihero or antiheroine
      e. Comparing the role of stereotype in communicating a message in the epics and on television
      f. Determining whether the "epic convention" is a form of stereotype
      g. Hazarding some guesses as to how heroes and heroines become known to their followers
      h. Discussing whether actions speak louder than words
      i. Predicting who will be tomorrow's heroes and heroines

The relative weight given to the various levels of intellectual tasks should be adjusted in accordance with the talents of the students. The teacher must provide an arena in which students can accomplish tasks that they might not do unless given appropriate help and direction.

Useful Suggestions

In the case of average students, considerable guidance should be offered by which they may acquire needed information. The language used by authors may need interpretation, and concepts may need clarification through many devices, such as discussion and questioning. Students should have considerable help in clarifying their ideas and perfecting their skills. Although opportunities should be given to all students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate, the major emphasis for most students should be on helping them gain information and build skills that they did not have at the beginning of the unit.

The gifted, on the other hand, need less guidance for the first two steps. Many can read and interpret new material quite adequately. They can pass a test without much teacher-guided study and discussion. Emphasis for them should be on the understanding of the subject in depth. As they learn to analyze the material, they should be led to develop new and more complete works of their own creation. Finally, they should evaluate their own products against some accepted standard and plan or predict further studies along the same or similar lines.

Young people should examine their own beliefs and attitudes. By contrasting the literary heroes of the past with the heroes and heroines of the present, boys and girls will make some important discoveries concerning their own attitudes toward heroism. Students who are now developing, sometimes painfully, a sense of their own identity in grades seven through nine will find strength in a selection of books composed in many different times and places, about many types of human characteristics and situations, and by authors of different styles, temperaments, and attitudes toward the quality and meaning of experience.

Beowulf

The study of the epic poem *Beowulf* has proved to be quite popular with and valuable for gifted students in grades seven through nine. Since few students at any age or school level will undertake to read *Beowulf* in its original form, however, teachers should consider using a version that is specifically designed for use with youngsters. Ian Serraillier's *Beowulf the Warrior* is a good choice.

Reading the poem aloud offers an excellent opportunity for teachers to demonstrate *how* poetry should be read. *Beowulf* also contains fine examples of alliteration, personification, hyperbole, and other poetic devices.

The Serraillier version of *Beowulf* consists of three books. In the first the reader meets Beowulf as a young man saving Hrothgar's

kingdom from the monster Grendel. During the reading of the first book, Beowulf's epic hero characteristics can be explored. These include his loyalty and bravery, his bigger-than-life character, the tremendous threat to his life, and his special weapon. Hrothgar is shown as the ideal king and Grendel as a misfit.

The second book focuses upon Grendel's mother and her attempt to avenge the death of her son. The hanging of Grendel's arm on the wall generally evokes comparisons to hunters' and fishers' mounting their trophies. Scalps, shrunken heads, and war souvenirs will probably be mentioned too.

Book three provides the basis for many discussions. After many years of peace, Beowulf must battle the Fire Dragon. Why is Hrothgar willing to "import" help, while Beowulf is compelled to fight alone? Does Beowulf want to die? Do the students ever want to run away and hide as Beowulf's people do? Is running away *always* wrong? What difficulties are inherent in aging? What comparisons can be made between the problems of Beowulf and those of today's heroes and heroines?

A number of films can be used to great advantage in a study of *Beowulf*. *The Day Manolete Was Killed* is excellent for use in discussing cowardice. After viewing *The Death of President Kennedy*, students can compare the funeral of a modern hero to that of Beowulf. Other films that teachers might use are *The Legend of Paul Bunyan*, *The Legend of John Henry*, *The Odyssey*, *The Titan, Michelangelo*, and *I Have a Dream: The Story of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Students may express their ideas or probe deeper into the theme in many ways. In addition to reading on their own in books from the class, school library, and/or local library, students might do the following:

- Make a game based on *Beowulf*, and teach the game to the class.
- Rules, a playing board, and pieces should be included.
- Perform a skit in which the villain or villainess becomes the hero or heroine.
- Write a song about a hero or heroine and his or her deeds.
- Make a poster, a mobile, or a diorama about a hero or heroine. Watch a movie or television show, and attempt to present the hero or heroine as a *classic* hero or heroine.
- Illustrate a scene from *Beowulf*. (The scenes can be placed in chronological order around the room to review the sequence of events.)
- Make an object that is described in the story: a sword, goblet, suit of armor, or the like.

Students should be encouraged to use their talents, to pursue their interests, and to share their talents and interests with the class. Other teachers should be encouraged to give a student guidance in (or credit for) creating a related item in their class.

Chapter 3

Decision Making

As young persons enter adolescence, they perceive the world in entirely new ways. The absolutes of childhood give way to doubt and ambiguity. Adolescents find that they are expected to make decisions for which they have limited background and that the possibilities for choice are increasing rapidly. They find themselves being pulled in many directions and being addressed by many voices. They are unable to handle their affairs on a clear-cut basis.

Deciding which way to turn will probably never be more acute than during junior high school years. Students must learn the nuances of language; they must learn shades of gray. A major decision-making strategy becomes necessary when students need help in making decisions. They need opportunities to talk about decision making impersonally without identifying their own insecurities for all to see. A study of some stories of conflict can help young people examine their problems of temptation without having their privacy violated. In beginning a unit on decision making, teachers should select one or two short stories for reading and discussion. "The Kitten," by Richard Wright; "The Parsley Garden," by William Saroyan; or "Mateo Falcone," by Prosper Merimee would be excellent choices. All are included in *Counterpoint in Literature.* The discussions about each story should focus on the decisions that were made and the possible alternatives. Students could be asked to change the decisions and/or the endings of the stories. These discussions will set the tone for the entire unit as students explore the reasons for and the effects of decisions.

Occasionally, the teacher may wish to have the class read something together or view a film and then discuss it as a group. As the students share ideas from their individual readings and other experiences, the scope of the unit will be broadened for everyone.

A good play can be a valuable experience in the unit on decision making. In one class a girl who had never been to the theater decided to purchase a season ticket after just such an experience.

At some point students should begin to realize that decisions fall into various categories. Some decisions are made for immediate gain and have deep consequences. Some are made for the benefit of others, without regard for oneself. Others affect other people in a negative way and may be misunderstood or considered "wrong." For

example, in reading Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, many students are troubled by Nora's decision to leave her children. On the other hand, some students feel strongly about individual identity.

When students are given the opportunity to read novels related to the decision-making theme, some will choose only youth-oriented works. Many teachers reject this type of reading for gifted students, but they should remember that not all students are motivated to read. Judy Blume's books on family problems and divorce and the works of Maia Wojciechowska and Paul Zindel (*The Pigman*) reflect the concerns of today's young people and are generally very popular with them. *Slake's Limbo*, by Felice Holman, is another excellent book for use in this unit.

The very capable and highly motivated students should be encouraged to read such selections as Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Stephen Vincent Binet's *The Devil and Daniel Webster*.

Selections from Thelma Altshuler's *Choices: Situations to Stimulate Thought and Expression* can result in lively debates. Each short piece requires the reader—or listener if the selections are read aloud to the class—to decide on a course of action. The variables in the situation are then changed, and the decision must be reconsidered.

Simulation games and role playing are other activities that can be used to encourage students to think before making decisions.

Art projects related to books and stories that students have read allow the students to express their interpretations of plots, conflicts, and the like. The possibilities for such projects include book jackets, mobiles, dioramas, and collages.

Gifted students often disapprove of the decisions that are made by the characters in their readings. Having students rewrite the ending to a story gives them an opportunity to express their feelings. Many reject the ending of Hinton's *That Was Then, This Is Now*, for example, because they cannot cope with the hero's belief that he must "turn in" his best friend for selling drugs. Others have Nora take her children with her when she leaves *A Doll's House*. In writing about the latter, one girl even sent the husband to a marriage counselor.

The types of activities that can be used to have students express themselves and their feelings and to recognize the importance of decision making in one's daily life are virtually limitless. In addition to the activities already mentioned, students can do the following:

- Present a skit or make a videotape or film related to the decision-making theme.
- Act as newspaper reporters, and interview minor characters from the stories.

- Rewrite the story in newspaper style. Students could create a front-page layout, including headlines and perhaps a photograph.
- Have a character in one story write a letter to a character in another story.
- Write a song related to the plot of a story.
- Write a poem, short story, or play that deals with decision making.
- Write a letter of advice in response to a fictitious "Dear John" or "Dear Mary" letter (written by the teacher) that includes a description of a conflict and a request for help in the making of a decision.
- In small groups discuss and determine solutions to various types of problems that the teacher has written on small cards. (*Example:* "You know that your closest friend is cheating on a test. What should you do?") Each group can then report on its decisions to the other groups.
- Suggest additional activities related to decision making.

Many films, too, are readily available to teachers for use in a unit on decision making. For example, film versions of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Katherine Mansfield's *Garden Party*, and Shakespeare's *Othello* can be used to stimulate discussions.

Chapter 4

The Prometheus Theme in Literature

As they mature, some of the most talented boys and girls find an increasing lack of understanding among others for their ideas and actions. Because they are gifted in intellectual matters, they often feel lonely and misinterpreted. Many special programs for the gifted are aimed at fifth and sixth graders. One can ask whether these programs are aimed at that level because relatively few adults can perform the intellectual gymnastics feasible for gifted persons age twelve and older.

Prometheus' act of stealing the sacred fire from Zeus for the benefit of the human race is often interpreted by young gifted persons as paralleling their own actions. They know the frustrations of having their own innocent, noncalculated questions interpreted as revolt. They recognize a kindred soul in Prometheus, whose only guilt, they believe, was that he sought an answer for human beings' problems.

One highly gifted seventh grader reported with amazement that his parents yelled at him when he installed his own bedside phone. Little did he know that the local phone company looks with displeasure on such experiments. All he wanted to discover was whether he had the ability to install the telephone. It seemed to him that his actions could save a great deal of time and labor. He was surprised when others were disturbed.

One gifted tenth-grade girl was chagrined to find that teachers did not welcome her predictably astute questions as to the "rightness" of given subjects, whether they concerned class assignments or class discussions. An intellectually gifted student in the eighth grade suffered extensive self-recrimination when he was expelled from his science and foreign language classes. His offense? He had asked, too many times, "How do you know that this statement is true?"

If, as is common, the extremely gifted see Prometheus as the eternal spirit of the unchained mind, then such students often feel a strong sense of empathy for his position. Many, encouraged by an increased understanding of Promethean frustrations, will be encouraged to aim high and to assume the role for which they are uniquely equipped.

Having the class read short stories together and then discuss them in terms of the general theme of the unit is a good way to begin a

unit on the Prometheus theme. (Some teachers may prefer another label for the theme, such as "Different Drummer" or "Rebels.") Ray Bradbury's "Flying Machine" is an excellent story with which to begin. In this story an emperor in ancient China has the inventor of a flying machine put to dea h because the emperor fears that the flying machine could be used to surmount the Great Wall of China. In an author's note Bradbury explains that such an event did take place in ancient China and that when he read of it, he understood the points of view of both the inventor and the emperor.

After several stories have been read and discussed, including, perhaps, the Prometheus legend, the students can begin to determine the many ways in which people come to be or feel alienated from others. The possibilities for such determinations include the following:

- Some students may read biographies of geniuses, inventors, or artists whose peers did not accept them.
- History enthusiasts may wish to research some famous rivals, such as Thomas à Becket and Henry II; Thomas More and Henry VIII; and Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I. Were they enemies? Why did one person in each rivalry have to be destroyed? What would have happened if their positions had been reversed?
- Science buffs may wish to learn more about the latest developments in such areas as genetic splicing and cloning. Medical publications, newspapers, and science fiction stories are all potential sources of information.
- The *loneliness* of youth may be treated as a separate category. Maia Wojciechowska's *Don't Play Dead Before You Have To* is a sensitively written book that appeals to many loners. Gifted students whose unique gifts are considered as strange have in common a special kind of loneliness. Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* is about just such a child.
- Exiles—people who are expelled or who must escape because of their beliefs—can be considered. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* may be read by very able readers; *Man Without a Country*, by Edward Hale, is written simply enough to be read by those with reading problems.
- Many leaders in struggles for racial equality have been misunderstood. Samplings from the writings of such persons could be examined.
- Women who were ahead of their time (for example, Isadora Duncan and Susan B. Anthony) are another interesting group that can be studied.

- Many people are different and/or misunderstood as a result of mental or physical limitations. William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*, John Neufeld's *Lisa, Bright and Dark*, Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, and Kin Platt's *Hey, Dummy* are about these types of individuals. All have strong appeal to students.

In some cases, especially with extremely gifted students, teachers may wish to culminate the unit with an in-depth study of the Prometheus legend.

Legend of Prometheus

According to the Greek myth, Prometheus was a Titan who stole the fire of heaven from Zeus and gave it to man. As punishment he was bound to a rock in the Caucasus and thereafter tortured by vultures that fed on his liver. In some versions of the myth, Prometheus created the first man from mud he had found in a river bed. He was the friend and benefactor of all human beings and defended them against the gods who desired to destroy the human race and supplant it with a new and better species. Prometheus stole the heavenly fire and, carrying it in a fennel stalk, gave it to the few people who escaped the "deluge" of Deucalion.

Aeschylus portrayed Prometheus as "nailed" to the rock when suffering for his attempt to benefit the human race. The tale of Epimetheus (*afterthought*) and Prometheus (*forethought*) is certainly a portion of the legend. In this myth Epimetheus distributed various talents, such as swiftness of foot and keenness of vision, to various animals at the time of the creation of the earth. Prometheus, finding none of such gifts left for humanity, gave to human beings the ultimate weapon, fire.

Material for Study

A hasty survey of the Promethean legend reveals almost limitless possibilities for examination. The whole question of fire mythology embraces a very wide cycle of similar benefactors, legends of whom may be found in the folklore of nations not even remotely connected with the Greeks. Similarly, historical evidence concerning a series of floods in Mesopotamia, as uncovered in the past 20 years, gives new insight to students examining the deluge myths. The folklore of many people contains reference to a great flood.

Some students will see a relationship between Prometheus and Lucifer (the "light bearer"), the fallen angel. Others will wish to explore Prometheus' role as savior or redeemer of his people. Still others will consider fire and knowledge parallel, in common with

Aeschylus and Percy Bysshe Shelley; such a concept opens up many possibilities. Perhaps the doctor in South Africa who made the first heart transplant was assuming the Promethean role, "stealing the sacred fire of heaven."

Budding scientists will undoubtedly see Prometheus as a scientist. The similarity between the use of fire and the discovery of atomic energy, together with the potential for both good and evil inherent in each, is inescapable. Other scientific advances, from space travel to development of "the pill" for limiting population, can be claimed to be analogous to the discovery of fire. Medical editor Harry Nelson reported on a panel brought together by the American College of Physicians. One member reported that recent experiments with animals indicated that drugs that will increase human beings' intelligence significantly will be available within five to ten years. He speculated that if a drug makes it possible to raise the IQ of any person 20 points, the changes that would suddenly be needed in education and politics would be tremendous. In addition, religious and moral values would change. Who would decide whether the drug should be used? Who would determine its recipients? What would be the criteria?[1]

Gifted young people often sense the terrible loneliness that often accompanies genious. Literature may provide, for the extremely bright, the only available door by which they can enter the community of genius to which they rightfully belong. If they begin to identify with those Promethean thinkers who, "transfigured by time, reappear from age to age," then perhaps their own uniqueness will be less of a burden for them.

[1]Harry Nelson, "Medical News," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1967.

Chapter 5

Fantasy World

Many gifted students are extremely creative and have vivid imaginations. Many are avid readers of the adventures of J. R. R. Tolkien's hobbits and Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea stories. Throughout the unit on fantasy, teachers should encourage their students to develop fantasy worlds and ideal worlds of their own; that is, to use their creativity and imagination. The students will reflect on the past and make predictions about the future. Some of the ideas that they explored in previous units will serve as a basis for new ideas in this unit. Who will be the heroes and heroines? How will decisions be made? What will be done about those who are different? Why do many science fiction stories include only young, healthy individuals? Why are many of the characters in such stories so robot-like?

Again, it is recommended that teachers begin the unit by having students read and discuss stories together. Sections from George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* or from More's *Utopia* would be appropriate. Selections from the works of Plato might also be used. The type of fantasy found in *Gulliver's Travels* will appeal to some students. Students with a special interest in math will enjoy Edwin Abbott's *Flatland,* in which people live in a one-dimensional world. Most gifted students have a good sense of humor and respond enthusiastically to the inhabitants of Flatland—circles, squares, triangles, and the like.

After completion of the initial readings, one class actually planned and built its own world. Over a period of several weeks, the students designed buildings, planned their locations, and made decisions about laws and how to enforce them. The first discussions involved large groups, but gradually small committees were formed to work on different areas. When the city planners grew frustrated trying to *explain* their plans to others, the suggestion was made that they construct a scale model of the city. Land-use plans had to be drawn up. As the project progressed, many problems had to be resolved. Someone was polluting the water. Someone was refusing to work. Somebody else took over an area planned for a park. There were no laws pertaining to these problems. Some of those who favored no laws at the beginning of the project began to adopt a different attitude. Finally, the students decided to develop a constitution. A

convention was called, delegates were chosen, and great debates were conducted.

Individual work by students can involve many types of activities, including creative writing projects; preparation of murals, mobiles, and models; script writing, costume designing, and set painting for use in dramatic presentations; and creation of musical instruments and writing and recording of music appropriate to the theme.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

In a follow-up study conducted four years after the initation of a special elementary school program for students identified as gifted, Mary Meeker found that students receiving A grades in high school had scored almost exclusively in the 130–136 IQ range on the *Stanford-Binet Test of Intelligence.* Students with the highest IQs (above 141) made mostly C grades. Dr. Meeker notes that a majority of all students continued to score above the ninetieth percentile on group achievement tests regardless of their grades in secondary school. She states:

> It is questionable now as to whether the elementary program had impact at the high school level. It is uncertain whether many of these gifted students are university-bound at all. A reevaluation of goals for gifted students needs to be considered. . . . It is a regrettable fact that high school placement in classes perpetuates the conveyor belt of performance and that little effort and time are given to remedial actions for the nonperforming gifted. . . .
>
> Our findings would indicate that those children who are performing at and test at a gifted level early in their school careers do not necessarily remain so at a performance level in high school, and that potentially brilliant achievers in later life are lost as a consequence of inadequate attention to their needs during the secondary school years.[1]

Some authorities have noted that boys testing above 145 IQ and girls testing above 155 IQ often have adjustment problems in school. If measured by the number of A's received in high school, achievement appears to be limited to the "barely gifted."

Placement Errors

The "conveyor belt of performance" noted by Dr. Meeker begins in the intermediate school or junior high school. Acceleration into advanced classes commences in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. In the self-contained classes of the elementary school, recognition of the individual's potential for leadership or creativity can be made by sensitive teachers. In junior high school and later in secondary

[1]Mary Meeker, "Differential Syndromes of Giftedness and Curriculum Planning: A Four-Year Follow-up," *Journal of Special Education,* II (Winter, 1968), 192.

school, placement in honors programs is based largely on performance as measured by grades.

This practice leaves much to be desired. The truth is that many educators do not know what to do with "highly gifted" young people. When gifted children are ten years old or less, teachers and administrators are usually superior to the children in mental power. But about the time that the children reach early adolescence, they are at least as perceptive as many teachers and administrators. The failure of the latter to develop suitable criteria for student placement in honors programs has led to almost total dependence on academic grades in determining placement. Thus, A students are labeled "achievers" and are placed in honors programs; C students are labeled "nonachievers" and are placed in regular classes.

One can imagine the predicament of the gifted student who has been placed in a class in which average performance is the norm. In a regular class the teacher should, because of the nature of the students involved, place primary importance on information gathering and confirmation. Extremely bright boys and girls, even if they have not received A grades in the past, should not be placed in such a situation. They learn differently. Their curriculum must, therefore, be different.

Dr. Meeker reports that six boys in her sampling who have IQ scores over 150 "will have real difficulty in getting into state universities on the basis of their grades." She states that two of the six have been sent to continuation school, another is a dropout, and three are failing to maintain passing grades.[2] Something is wrong with an educational system in which six such talented boys are dropouts or are failing. For an almost parallel situation, one can imagine what would happen if an intermediate or secondary school teacher were sent into a fifth-grade classroom and asked to carry out the assignments made by the teacher of that fifth-grade class. Would the teacher do what he or she is told?

The reader should note that the honors programs discussed by Dr. Meeker are not designed for mentally gifted minors, do not meet the criteria established by the state for programs for the mentally gifted, and would not qualify for funds for such programs. The placement of mentally gifted students in classes with high achieving, nongifted students does not provide for meeting the needs of gifted students. Programs must be developed specifically for mentally gifted students, for the verbal and the laconic, the reader as well as the dreamer.

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[2] Meeker, "Differential Syndromes," 193.

Implications for the Gifted

Young adolescents need particular help in bridging the period between childhood and adulthood. The gifted are no exception. During this time when the maturing individual must make choices based on limited background, teachers must attempt to close the generation gap through classroom activities that promote communication between youths and adults. Whether these activities are based on an examination of great themes in literature or on communications work in a special laboratory, the English teacher can provide the arena in which such an exchange is possible. By structuring the English program of the junior high school around the needs and concerns of the students involved, teachers can help the gifted to reach their own maximum potential.

Because the potential of gifted young people is virtually unpredictable, these students must be offered a program without limits. In no case should they be confined to a curriculum in which limits are set on the basis of the talents of the adults who plan the program. With an open-end structure and unlimited possibilities for development of individual talents, these exceptional young people will do well. America needs their talents. The fabric of tomorrow's society depends on educational opportunities now being offered to America's young people. What is taught and how it is taught will, to a large extent, determine the future.

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